

VZCZCXRO7985  
RR RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHKUK RUEHLZ RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #1247/01 2381506  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 251506Z AUG 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2842  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001247

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ELA  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [SOC](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUNIST SOCIAL AFFAIRS MINISTER SEEKS BIGGER ROLE;  
TALKS OF NEW ALLIANCES IN 2009

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) During a visit by Charge Grant, newly appointed Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Mario Aoun explained that the Ministry of Social Affairs' (MOSA) main challenges in implementing social reform were overlapping responsibilities with other ministries and a small budget. Aoun said he hoped to revitalize the role of MOSA's Social Development Centers, to be better able to provide for those in need. Politically, Aoun, a long-time of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), welcomed the establishment of bilateral relations with Syria and defended the FPM's MOU with Hizballah as the only way to prevent civil strife. End summary.

MINISTRY CHALLENGED BY OVERLAPPING RESPONSIBILITIES,  
-----

2. (SBU) On August 20, Charge Grant, accompanied by LES Economic Specialist, paid a courtesy call on newly appointed Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Mario Aoun, along with his advisor Dr. Khalil Hamade. Aoun expressed his support for the social and health components of the Paris III agreement, most of which were included in the GOL's recent ministerial policy statement, although he hoped that his ministry would be more involved that in the past in implementing the GOL's social policies.

3. (SBU) In Aoun's view, the main challenges faced by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) stem from the wide range of sectors that MOSA covers, including regional development, social protection, health, and education services, as well as the fact that many of its responsibilities overlap with those of other ministries. With the government having no strategy in place to deal with coordination among ministries, finding and implementing solutions to issues such as child labor (which involves MOSA, and the ministries of Public Health, Justice, Interior, and Labor) is problematic, he said. He complained that MOSA suffers from an insufficient budget relative to the scope and importance of its responsibilities.

4. (SBU) Commenting on ongoing UNDP and World Bank projects aimed at assisting with social sector reforms, Aoun expressed his frustration that money allocated for such projects was wasted on studies, rather than on implementation. "We don't need more studies to tell us there are poor people in Lebanon!" he argued, saying that funds should be used instead for services. He estimated that \$200,000 has been spent so far on such studies.

REVITALIZING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CENTERS  
-----

5. (SBU) Although Aoun had not yet fully familiarized himself with the ministry or developed a clear strategy on how to implement social reform, he emphasized the importance of MOSA's Social Development Centers (SDC) located across Lebanon. He made a pitch

for assistance to help equip these centers, and thus increase and improve the services they provide to citizens (free medical consultations and medication, food rations, and distributing basic necessities). He also asked that the USG continue providing assistance to combat child labor, as it has done in the past through USDOL-funded projects.

#### HIGHER RELIEF COMMISSION NEEDS TO BE BROUGHT BACK TO MOSA

-----

¶16. (SBU) As part of his way to increase MOSA's role and available resources, Aoun mentioned the need to reintegrate the Higher Relief Commission (HRC) to MOSA. Aoun said that in 1996, former PM Rafiq Hariri had detached it from MOSA, so that it now answers directly to the PM's Office. Since then, it has enjoyed a bigger budget and, in Aoun's view, has been used to benefit a selected number of people based on political considerations. Aoun has recently brought this to the attention of PM Siniora, who said he was considering abolishing the HRC altogether. But Aoun believes that it would be important to maintain the HRC, and as part of MOSA.

#### DEFENDING THE AOUNIST LINE

-----

¶17. (SBU) A long time member of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Aoun (who is not related to FPM leader General Michel Aoun) said that although the cabinet does and will have differences of opinion on certain issues (such as high-level nominations and the electoral law), it would work as an unified cabinet. He welcomed the establishment of diplomatic relations with Syria, adding that it is the best framework in which to solve bilateral problems, such as

BEIRUT 00001247 002 OF 002

amending agreements ratified in the 1990s, as well as addressing the issue of the Lebanese detained in Syrian prisons.

¶18. (SBU) Aoun reiterated the FPM's belief in the need to deal with Syria and not continue to criticize it after its withdrawal from Lebanon. "We were against Syria when it was present in Lebanon," he said, "and would be their toughest opponents if they were to come back, but we cannot aim at changing their regime. If the U.S. wants to do so, fine." Aoun explained the FPM's rationale for what its members insist on calling its memorandum of understanding with Hizballah, saying that reaching agreement with Hizballah was the only way of preventing sectarian strife, and was not aimed against the U.S. Hizballah is too powerful militarily to ignore, he argued, and the MOU managed to "reintegrate" Hizballah into Lebanese society. Aoun suggested that the USG pressure Israel to withdraw from the Sheba'a farms, removing a major excuse used by Hizballah to keep its weapons.

#### WEAK CHRISTIAN LEADERS

-----

¶19. (SBU) Aoun believed that General Michel Aoun should have been elected as Lebanon's president, saying he is the most popular and representative of all Christian candidates. He said that positions that are filled by Christians (such as the presidency) are traditionally given to "weak Christian candidates," as opposed to the Speaker of Parliament and Prime Minister, both of which are the most popular figures within their religious communities (Shia and Sunni, respectively). Regarding the 2009 parliamentary elections, Aoun hinted that he may be running for the Maronite seat in the Chouf district, where he ran and lost in 2005. He also did not completely reject the idea of an alliance between the FPM and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, a key player in the majority, in that region.

#### COMMENT

-----

¶10. (SBU) In the previous cabinet, MOSA was headed by March 14 MP Nayla Mouawad. Minister Aoun's appointment in the new cabinet shifted the seat to the opposition camp. Rumors abound about corruption and political favoritism in its work. Although Aoun

seemed committed to leaving his mark on improving some of the services, mainly health services, he seemed to realize that his short term in office, until the parliamentary elections next spring, will not give him enough time to implement significant reform. End comment.

GRANT